
Citation:

Chambers, C (2006) Representations of the oil encounter in Amitav Ghosh's *The circle of reason*. *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 41 (1). pp. 33-50. ISSN 0021-9894 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021989406062828>

Link to Leeds Beckett Repository record:

<https://eprints.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/id/eprint/944/>

Document Version:

Article (Accepted Version)

The aim of the Leeds Beckett Repository is to provide open access to our research, as required by funder policies and permitted by publishers and copyright law.

The Leeds Beckett repository holds a wide range of publications, each of which has been checked for copyright and the relevant embargo period has been applied by the Research Services team.

We operate on a standard take-down policy. If you are the author or publisher of an output and you would like it removed from the repository, please [contact us](#) and we will investigate on a case-by-case basis.

Each thesis in the repository has been cleared where necessary by the author for third party copyright. If you would like a thesis to be removed from the repository or believe there is an issue with copyright, please contact us on openaccess@leedsbeckett.ac.uk and we will investigate on a case-by-case basis.

Representations of the Oil Encounter in Amitav Ghosh's *The Circle of Reason*

Claire Chambers

Leeds Metropolitan University, UK

Amitav Ghosh's first novel, *The Circle of Reason*, is an intriguing debut, which introduces and explores themes that are developed in his later work. The novel is ostensibly a *bildungsroman* recounting the journey of Alu, a Bengali orphan, from the obscure village of Lalpukur to Calcutta, Kerala, the Middle East, and Algeria. It also incorporates elements of the picaresque novel, magic realism, the novel of ideas, the thriller or detective novel (with Assistant Superintendent of Police, Jyoti Das, trailing the alleged extremist, Alu, through several continents), and the Hindu epic. The text thereby offsets linear narrative techniques against a multi-voiced, cyclical structure. Set in the twentieth century, its frequent use of flashbacks, memories, and oral stories enables the time-scheme to loop between Calcutta in the 1950s and North Africa in the late 1970s, to name but two of the novel's many locations.

The novel has evident flaws, the most serious of which is that it does not hang together as a whole. It is structured into three sections, each of which has a different setting, characters, and concerns. Alu and his pursuer Jyoti Das are the only characters who are constants throughout the novel. Despite the use of such recurring motifs as sewing machines, birds, and *The Life of Pasteur*, the novel's sections remain discrete entities that for the most part fail to dovetail. Because of this lack of cohesion, in this paper I have decided to focus much of my attention on the second section of *The Circle of Reason*, entitled "Rajas".¹ I analyze Ghosh's handling of generic form, looking at this section's amorphous attempt to represent the globalized societies of the Middle East. Although *The Circle of Reason* has not received as much critical attention as Ghosh's other works, the novel evinces an important distinguishing characteristic of Ghosh's fiction to date: his heterogeneous use of genre. Despite its limitations, this lively first novel demonstrates Ghosh's eclectic interaction with ideas from both East and West, and his ability to create a composite generic framework in which to discuss these ideas.

"Rajas" is set in al-Ghazira, a country which, despite its fictionality, shares many of its features with existing states in the Persian Gulf. Like Saudi Arabia and

Kuwait, al-Ghazira is reliant on Western technical knowledge for its economic survival, and channels much of its wealth into short-term conspicuous consumption. In this paper I argue that just as in the colonial era science was an integral component of the “civilizing mission”,² so too applied science and technology now play a crucial part in neo-colonial subjugation. I also suggest that in this part of the novel, Ghosh experiments with different literary modes, most notably those of the picaresque and social realism, in his attempt to represent the Middle East in fiction.

In Ghosh’s 1992 essay “Petrofiction”, which I take to be a central statement of his literary goals in writing about oil and the late twentieth-century phenomenon of globalization, he writes:

As one of the few people who have tried to write about the floating world of oil, I can bear witness to its slipperiness, to the ways in which it tends to trip fiction into incoherence. In the end, perhaps, it is the craft of writing itself — or rather writing as we know it today — that is responsible for the muteness of the Oil Encounter. The experiences that oil has generated run counter to many of the historical imperatives that have shaped writing over the last couple of centuries and given it its distinctive forms.³

The first sentence of this quotation hints at dissatisfaction with his portrayal of the oil economy in *The Circle of Reason*, and indeed there is a certain amount of “incoherence” in the later sections of the novel. *In an Antique Land*, which came out the same year as “Petrofiction”, is perhaps a fuller and more successful account of the “floating world of oil”.⁴ In the second part of the passage cited above, Ghosh contends that in order to address the unique situation of the contemporary oil economy, literature will have to be drastically altered in its form. He goes on to argue that the Gulf states, with their mixed populations of American oil-men, Arab residents, and Asian migrant workers, constitute “a world that is intrinsically displaced, heterogeneous, and international”.⁵ The novel, which he suggests has traditionally been a genre that is monolingual and with a fixed sense of place, is ill-equipped to deal with the microcosmic world of oil. The central issue Ghosh is raising in this essay is the question of how a writer can create a new kind of novel, the structure and form of which will reflect a globalized world.

In the essay Ghosh also suggests that the consequences of the discovery of oil in the Gulf are as far-reaching as the development of the spice trade centuries ago. This comparison initially seems incongruous, and his statement “oil is clearly the only

commodity that can serve as an analogy for pepper”⁶ wittily juxtaposes and challenges our notions of beauty and ugliness, particularly in the implied aromatic contrast between the two products. Yet despite this superficial polarity, the oil and spice trades have in common their economic importance, the inequality of the benefits they bring, and the international power struggle over their control. The comparison is exploited with sophistication in *In an Antique Land*, in which medieval spice traders are depicted alongside present-day oil migrants. Yet, whereas the spice trade inspired great literature (he mentions such writers Duarte Barbosa and Gaspa Correia),⁷ Ghosh can think of few contemporary writers who have found the “Oil Encounter” worthy of attention. A handful of Arabic-language writers have addressed this difficult subject, and Ghosh devotes a sizeable portion of the essay to a review of the attempts of Abdelrahman Munif to meet the literary challenges posed by oil.

However, Ghosh criticizes the American literary scene for failing to acknowledge the pivotal role of oil in their country’s current global dominance. Given that a central trope in American literature is the creation of a settlement out of wilderness, and that many American workers view themselves as effecting just such a transformation in the Middle East, it is surprising that no American writer has tackled the Oil Encounter. Ghosh argues that the “Great American Oil Novel” has yet to be written,⁸ but that its creation would reveal much about Americans’ self-perception and their position in the world. Ghosh rejects the American novel’s alleged insularity, asserting that, in contrast with the country’s increasingly wide-ranging foreign policy, “its fictional gaze has turned inward, becoming ever more introspective, ever more concentrated upon its own self-definition”.⁹ Most American novelists, he suggests, seem unable to resist the urge to portray a geographically bounded place, to describe characters as located in a village, a town, or a city. Yet it is not just the U.S. that Ghosh criticizes for its inattention to the Oil Encounter. He makes the point that for Indians, like Americans, the oil economy is something that “no one [...] who has any thought either for his conscience or his self-preservation can afford to ignore”.¹⁰ As we shall see, India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and many other Asian countries send vast numbers of migrant workers over to the Gulf. Despite this fact, Ghosh observes that Bengali, a language that has a well-developed travelogue genre, fails almost entirely to interrogate the experiences of India’s many Gulf expatriates. Ghosh tries to fill this

lacuna in *The Circle of Reason* and I shall examine the extent of his success in this paper.

The first section of *The Circle of Reason* is, like the American novels Ghosh criticizes, located within a delimited and familiar place. The central character in this section, entitled “*Satwa: Reason*”, is Alu’s uncle, Balaram, and this eccentric schoolmaster’s experiences in Calcutta and the small Bengali border town of Lalpukur are juxtaposed. However, the discussion about rural and metropolitan India is unexpectedly curtailed when most of the main characters, including Balaram, are murdered. The novel changes course as Alu, wrongly suspected to be the murderer, goes into exile first in Kerala and then the imaginary Middle Eastern oil state of al-Ghazira. From the moment that Alu goes on the run, Ghosh introduces a new formal framework of the picaresque. This genre is peculiarly appropriate for the presentation of the Oil Encounter and globalization.

Harry Sieber, in an authoritative monograph on the picaresque, quotes Fong de Haan’s succinct definition of the genre as “the autobiography of a *pícaro*, a rogue, and in that form a satire upon the conditions and persons of the time that gives it birth”.¹¹ Although *The Circle of Reason* is not written in the first person, and although its perspective oscillates between Alu and other important characters, the novel nonetheless borrows certain picaresque features. Sieber lists the following typical characteristics of the picaresque: “poverty, delinquency, ‘upward mobility’ (self-improvement of the *pícaro*), travel as an escape from despair, social satire of a system unresponsive to the needs and desires of a growing active community of ‘have-nots’”.¹² All of these elements are apparent in Ghosh’s narrative, with the exception of “upward mobility”. Alu differs from the typical picaresque anti-hero in that he is downwardly mobile, his status deteriorating from that of a relatively privileged schoolmaster’s nephew to an exiled criminal. This caveat aside, other features encourage the reader to view the novel, like its picaresque forebears, as a critique of societies that neglect their “have-nots”. Poverty and petty delinquency are certainly widespread in *The Circle of Reason*. The novel focuses on the misery and displacement caused by the Bangladesh war, and on the lack of job security or legal rights faced by migrant workers in the Gulf states. Although we are never encouraged to view Alu as a rogue, he is technically a felon, illegal immigrant, and rabble-rouser.

For most of the novel he is trying to evade the policeman, Jyoti Das, who suspects him of belonging to an “extremist” terrorist movement responsible for the destruction of his village.

Alu evinces other traits of the picaresque anti-hero outlined in Sieber’s book, such as the fact that he is an orphan and outsider, adopted by his uncle, but never quite “belonging” anywhere. Travel is an important feature of the picaresque, which becomes more evident as the novel progresses. Alu and his companions’ restless movement accelerates as Jyoti Das gains ground on them, and Zindi’s repeated exhortations to “Go west!” become increasingly desperate.¹³ Two other common set-pieces of the genre are identified by Sieber as the *pícaro*’s encounter with a “thieves’ society”, and his acting as an imposter to gain acceptance with a powerful benefactor.¹⁴ Such episodes are loosely incorporated in *The Circle of Reason*. For instance, Zindi’s house in al-Ghazira — while hardly a “thieves’ society” — is nonetheless depicted as sheltering a fairly desperate group of migrants, who go to great lengths to survive the hostile environment of the oil economy. Furthermore, in the novel’s final section Alu, Kulfi, and Zindi masquerade as a respectable family, in order to gain the support of a benefactor, Mrs Verma. With regard to form, Sieber argues that the picaresque tends towards a digressive, open-ended structure.¹⁵ This is a noticeable feature of *The Circle of Reason*, as is humour, also listed as an important feature. It thus seems likely that, while it does not conform to every picaresque convention, the novel is certainly alluding to this centuries-old genre.

The question remains as to why Ghosh integrates elements of the picaresque within his novel. Sieber’s work is again illuminating; he shows that different emphases were placed on the genre in its various European contexts, and the picaresque was “made to conform to the peculiar satiric, social, and historical contexts of each country”.¹⁶ This suggests the utility of the form to Ghosh’s project. The picaresque form has frequently been adapted to new locations, and Ghosh may be interpreted as reconfiguring the *pícaro* to suit the modern world of globalization and international migration. In this context, it is worth considering Sieber’s claim that the convention of the *pícaro*’s journey has always lent itself to the myth of migration, and to visions of a New World utopia in which the upwardly mobile *pícaro* can find riches and respectability. He writes:

In the seventeenth century the New World symbolized an escape from the hierarchical society of Spain. Seville was populated with *indianos*, Spaniards who had returned home after making their fortunes in America. [...] In the eighteenth century the English colonies fulfilled the same function. *Moll Flanders* reveals how even a transported criminal can “earn” his [*sic*] freedom from poverty through careful investment. In the nineteenth century popular myth defined the United States as a Promised Land with unparalleled opportunities for getting ahead.¹⁷

In *The Circle of Reason* Ghosh shows that, for residents of third-world countries in the late twentieth century, the utopian myth of a New World of wealth and opportunity has been transposed onto the oil-rich states of the Middle East. The novel illustrates that, while there is some truth in Indian rumours of great material success to be had in the Gulf (see pp. 158 – 59), the reality for migrants tends to be very different.

In a harrowing passage, migrant workers who have been shipped to al-Ghazira are described as follows:

those ghosts behind the fence were not men, they were tools — helpless, picked for their poverty. In those days when al-Ghazira was still a real country they were brought here to slip between its men and their work, like the first whiffs of an opium dream; they were brought as weapons, to divide the Ghaziris from themselves and the world of sanity; to turn them into buffoons for the world to laugh at (p. 261).

This description of the workers as “ghosts”, “tools”, “weapons”, and “buffoons” contrasts with the hope represented by the “New World” in European picaresque narratives. In the English and Spanish narratives discussed by Sieber, the *pícaro*, no matter how poor and dissolute, is still a member of a colonizing nation, and if he gets the chance to migrate to a colony, he will occupy a position of authority. The faceless migrants Ghosh describes, on the other hand, come from previously colonized countries and therefore have no such privileged relationship with their “New World”. In fact, although Ghosh does not make it explicit in the passage quoted above, their experience of migration is evidently tainted by neo-colonialism. Ghosh’s use of the passive tense (“were brought”) only hints at the multinational corporations that are responsible for their exploitation. In the light of this discussion of migration Ghosh may be seen to be rewriting and updating the picaresque genre from a postcolonial standpoint. Just as the *pícaro*’s dubious lineage and criminal activities define him as an outsider, so today’s third-world migrants in the Gulf states are marginalized and excluded from the political process. Ghosh makes the picaresque’s original aims

relevant for contemporary society, giving a voice to obscure economic refugees and satirizing the society that oppresses them.

In addition to the novel's picaresque mode, its detective novel allusions,¹⁸ and its much-discussed use of magic realism,¹⁹ it is less often realized that there are also elements of social realism in Ghosh's portrayal of the Middle East. In contrast to recent theory's celebration of the enabling possibilities that the postcolonial migrant allegedly finds in "in-between" spaces, Ghosh provides a pessimistic depiction of the experiences of a migrant underclass of undocumented workers in the dominant culture of al-Ghazira. This may be seen as an example of social realism, both because it is a detailed account of the activities of working-class people, which are represented as being heroic,²⁰ and because it broadly accords with research into labour conditions in the Gulf, creating an impression of verisimilitude. Since the discovery there of rich oil reserves in the early twentieth century, the Gulf has become a region characterized by dislocation and population flows. The whole of the Middle East has been affected by the post-Second World War oil boom. Even the economies of the so-called oil-poor countries, such as Egypt, Jordan, and Yemen, are heavily reliant on remittances sent by migrant workers in the oil-rich countries to their families back home. Attracted by the easy availability of work and high wages on offer, large numbers of Arab migrants flock to the Gulf states each year. From the mid-1970s to mid-1980s, workers from poor Asian countries such as Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, and the Philippines were also encouraged to come over, as they were seen as being "cheaper and more pliable" than indigenous or other Arab labourers.²¹ Yet expectations of the good life were frequently dashed by the exploitation, poor conditions and xenophobic abuse that are common features of migrant existence. While the oil-rich countries are eager to benefit from the inexpensive and often highly skilled labour of these workers, little effort is made to integrate them into the society. Immigrants tend to be spatially segregated from the indigenous populations and assigned barren land, such as former desert sites, in which to live or work.²² Since the mid-1980s' slowdown in international oil consumption, workers from both Asia and the oil-poor countries have been forced to accept lower wages and, in some cases, job cuts. The decrease in demand has not stemmed the in-flow of labourers, but immigrants are increasingly forced to work illegally, with the maltreatment and insecurity that this entails.

Oil-endowed states such as Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, have benefited from the mineral in obvious and frequently ostentatious ways. Despite their vast wealth, however, these countries' economies are more vulnerable than might be supposed. Their small and/or unskilled populations mean that they are dependent on foreign workers to man the industrial infrastructure. In the case of Kuwait, this has led to the country becoming the world's first "rentier state". Its indigenous population is outnumbered by foreigners, who comprise an astonishing 75% of the work force,²³ and its economy depends for its survival on overseas investment.²⁴ The last example suggests that the oil-rich states are financially precarious another way, due to their reliance on foreign investment opportunities, technology, and markets. As Y.A. Sayigh has shown, inhabitants of the newly wealthy states are more than usually enthralled by electrical and consumer goods.²⁵ These are imported from the West and Japan in such quantities that the countries plough most their wealth back into the world economy, rather than achieving regional or pan-Arab sustainability. Furthermore, many of the oil-rich countries have tried to jump-start their industrial capabilities by importing modern machines and technological know-how. In the long term this has meant that behind the façade of wealth in the oil-rich countries is a worrying lack of indigenous skills, entrepreneurialism, and industrial infrastructure.

Many of these issues are dramatized in *The Circle of Reason*, with the oil economy appearing as an asymmetrical and frequently oppressive system. The first glimpses we are given of this system are from onboard the boat *Mariamamma*, which transports Alu and a small group of (mostly illegal) immigrants to al-Ghazira. En route we are shown the lengths to which these Indians will go to avail themselves of the alleged employment opportunities, consumer goods, and freedom and rights of this promised land. *Mariamamma's* engine is defective and the immigrants spend several days stranded on the ocean, wondering if they will ever reach the Gulf. Yet the narrative suggests that they are fortunate in travelling onboard an expensive and comparatively safe boat. Some boats are so overcrowded with people desperate to emigrate that they capsize or sink, while others are apprehended by the harbour police (p. 169). A disturbing description is given of Karthamma, a heavily pregnant Keralan woman who is convinced that if she can get to al-Ghazira her child will have "houses and cars and multi-storeyed buildings" (p. 177). When her labour starts, she resists it

with all the strength of her will, between screams demanding the papers that she believes will convey Ghaziri citizenship and rights on her baby.

Yet Karthamma's confidence in the inexhaustible prosperity and opportunities of al-Ghazira is shown to be unfounded. On arrival, she and the other newcomers find accommodation with the larger-than-life Egyptian madam, Zindi at-Tiffaha. Zindi's house provides refuge for a group of migrants from Egypt, the Indian subcontinent, and North Africa, on the condition that they find work and contribute towards the house's upkeep. As Zindi points out, work in al-Ghazira is far scarcer than the Gulf's reputation suggests: "[t]here are hundreds, thousands of chhokren [boys] [...] begging; begging for jobs" (p. 180). Many of those in the house who manage to find work suffer terrible misfortune. Kulfi works as a cook in a rich Ghaziri house, which is an easy and lucrative job, until she is sacked because of a misunderstanding due to her poor understanding of Arabic. Professor Samuel does an accounting job in a Western-style supermarket, for which he is paid under the odds because he doesn't possess a work permit. He loses his position when he inadvertently startles a Ghaziri woman who, perhaps influenced by racist stereotypes of Indians, assumes that he means to molest her. Abusa the Frown is reported to the police for working illegally and is never heard from again. Worst of all, we hear of several other immigrants being killed on construction sites by faulty equipment or materials. The "litany of calamities" (p. 201) portrayed in the novel may be seen, in the light of Peter N. Woodward's research into migrant labour in Saudi Arabia, to be an accurate reflection of migrant experience. Woodward demonstrates that undocumented workers in the oil-rich states submit to unhealthy or even dangerous working conditions, long working hours, few employment rights, and hostility from the local population.²⁶

Indigenous suspicion and fear of the immigrant community means that the latter tends to be sequestered in separate living areas. In *The Circle of Reason*, the places where locals and foreigners live, work, eat, and shop are clearly demarcated. Most immigrants live on a narrow inlet known as "Ras al-Maqtu', the Severed Head" (p. 196). The suggestion of violence in the name is borne out, as we have seen, by the suffering that many of its inhabitants experience in their workplaces. In addition, connotations of severance reflect the Ras's isolation from more affluent districts in al-

Ghazira. The Ras is essentially a shanty-town, characterized by “roofs of corrugated iron and halved oil-drums, with [...] crazily angled wooden platforms and tracery of pumpkin vines” (p. 196). It is populated by people “from all the corners of the world” (p. 226): we see Baluchis and Bangladeshis, Egyptians and Moroccans living here, using their wits to survive. The heterogeneous and multicultural atmosphere of the Gulf, precipitated by a global capitalism, is evoked by this description of a bazaar near the Ras:

On one side of the road, jostling for space, were tiled Iranian chelo-kebab shops, Malayali dosa stalls, long, narrow Lebanese restaurants, fruit-juice stalls run by Egyptians from the Sa'id, Yemeni cafés with aprons of brass-studded tables spread out on the pavement, vendors frying ta'ameyya on push-carts — as though half the world's haunts had been painted in miniature along the side of a single street (p. 344).

The bustling microcosm described in this passage contrasts sharply with the sterile “concrete-and-glass cliff of hotels and offices” that lines the Ghaziri district on the other side of the inlet.

As this example suggests, the Ras is socially as well as spatially segregated from the bourgeois Ghaziri areas. It is seen as a threatening ghetto: taxi- and bus-drivers refuse to go there at night (p. 306) and an Indian waiter is insulted at the suggestion that he would live in what he darkly refers to as “that place” (p. 322). Despite the Ras's dangerous reputation, many of its occupants see it as a sheltering domicile (p. 226) and the community that lives there is shown to be lively and supportive. Immigrants spend much time there drinking coffee and smoking *narjilas*, exchanging gossip and stories of local interest. At times of trouble the residents forget their frequent squabbles, and band together to defend their community against outsiders. For commerce, the Ras is serviced by its Souq, a dark, labyrinthine marketplace that, in its raucous, jostling intimacy, is so different from more modern shopping areas in al-Ghazira that it appears to be “almost another country” (p. 194).

The lifestyles of most Ghaziris differ dramatically from the perilous existence of the migrants. Ghaziris live in modern, sanitary districts, wear fashionable Western clothes (p. 209), and often have decadent hobbies such as helicopter- or aeroplane-flying (p. 346). They do their grocery shopping in sterile, brightly-lit supermarkets. These supermarkets, such as the one in which Professor Samuel works, are full of imported products: “freshly frozen Australian lamb and Danish mutton, French

cauliflowers and Egyptian cabbages” (p. 208). This illustrates al-Ghazira’s confluence with, and reliance on, the forces of globalization. For consumer goods Ghaziris go to the Star, a new shopping mall that reveals a great deal about the concomitant hubris and vulnerability of the oil-exporting states.

The Star is al-Ghazira’s tallest and most opulent building, so-called because of its “five pointed arms” (p. 263). The abrupt disintegration of the mall signals the Ghaziris’ precarious economic dependence on foreign consumer and technological goods. The Star collapses before it has even been opened, creating a mountain of rubble, strewn with televisions, radios, washbasins, and refrigerators. Alu, who has been working on a construction site there, is trapped beneath its wreckage for days. His narrow escape from being flattened by the weight of imported technological goods makes literal the crushing effect that consumerism has had on the Gulf states’ economies. As Y.A. Sayigh points out, the oil-rich nations have some of the highest levels of import per capita in the world, and 93% of the goods imported come from outside the Arab world. This, he argues, represents a serious “leakage” of Arab wealth into the world economy.²⁷ If one scrutinizes the “*Rajas*” section it becomes evident that the money generated by oil is only a short-term solution. Al-Ghazira’s reliance on foreign technologies and skills means that many construction projects are too expensive to be completed and that the Ghaziris have become a minority in their own country. This is evident in a description of “the entrails of unfinished buildings festooned across the skyline, and the flow of people with their inexplicable nationalities” (p. 321). The Star may thus be usefully interpreted a symbol of the subjugation of the Gulf states to the forces of global capital.

In addition, the Star was created against a historical background of exploitation and neo-colonialism. In the chapter “From an Egg-Seller’s Mind”, Hajj Fahmy tells the story of the mall’s conception. He goes back in time to describe al-Ghazira in the days before the multinational companies arrived on their quest to find oil. At that time al-Ghazira was far from rich, but the country was ruled by its own leader, the Malik, and still had a certain amount of autonomy. After oil is discovered there, the British send a resident to al-Ghazira to persuade the Malik to sign a treaty giving them exclusive digging rights. The Malik angrily rejects their advances, drawing on “histories of the great Baghdadi and Cairene dynasties” (p. 249) to formulate an

inchoate plan of Arab resistance. Rather than bombing the Ghaziris into submission, the so-called “Oilmen” (whose nationality is indeterminate) choose more indirect methods of persuasion. They spread rumours about the Malik’s madness, undermining public confidence in him, and cultivate his half-brother, the Amin, as an alternative leader. They bring in acquiescent Asian labourers to show the Ghaziris that strikes and union agitation cut no ice with them. In a masterly piece of propaganda, they also introduce “specially grown date palms; unique palms which could thrive on any soil” into al-Ghazira. These palms are allowed to bloom in a patch of barren ground in order to impress on its inhabitants “the things the world could do for the forgotten land of al-Ghazira” (p. 257). However, the novel shows that this humanitarian rhetoric is merely intended as a smokescreen to hide the Oilmen’s real intentions to appropriate the land for oil development. Thus, a seemingly benign application of scientific and technological knowledge in practice merely serves to mask colonial ambitions.²⁸

The date palms become a battleground on which the struggle for control of al-Ghazira is played out. Despite the rebels’ initial success in burning down the palms, the Oilmen prevail, and the Ghaziris find themselves in a state of submerged colonialism: “the whole country was [an] Oiltown now” (p. 263). Strikes, trade unions, and demonstrations are banned, and protestors are harshly put down by “the newest and best guns and helicopters and computers money can buy” (p. 261). The Oilmen’s strong-arm tactics are not employed with any degree of emotion:

This was no feud: no tyrants died; there was no fratricide, no regicide, no love, no hate. It was just practice for the princes of the future and their computers — an exercise in good husbandry (p. 262).

Here, the Oilmen’s activities are described in pointedly neutral language as “practice”, which suggests both that violence is standard procedure to the Oilmen, and also that they could wreak much greater damage if they put their minds to it. The repeated reference to computers indicates that new technologies are used as “tools of empire”²⁹ to disempower nations that do not have access to relevant equipment or expertise. Finally, the ironic use of the word “husbandry” foreshadows a similarly double-edged usage of the term in *In an Antique Land*.³⁰ The Oilmen decide to build the Star on the plot of land where the date palms once stood, “in celebration of the starry future” (p. 263). In the light of Hajj Fahmy’s narration, these words seem

ominous, suggesting a future in which the Ghaziris will be entirely ruled by multinational companies and giant producers. Fahmy provides a list of all the people who would have been dispossessed or financially ruined had the Star opened and concludes, in language that is reminiscent of Shakespeare: “[n]o one wanted the Star. That was why the Star fell: a house which nobody wants cannot stand” (p. 264). The falling Star therefore partly symbolizes the potential collapse of neo-colonialism.

Colonialism is rarely mentioned by name in the novel, and it is remarkable how rarely the British, who rule over the India of Balaram’s youth, or the Americans and multinationals, who have behind-the-scenes control in the of the novel’s 1970s oil economy setting, are explicitly referred to in *The Circle of Reason*. And yet colonialism and neo-colonialism are central concerns of the novel, featuring as an absence that is usually represented by technologically advanced gadgets and consumer goods. One of the few instances in the novel where the word “colonize” is used comes in a description of Balaram’s wife, Toru-debi, whose heart is said to be “securely colonized” by her Singer sewing machines (p. 6). In the light of this usage, we may feel that most of the main characters in the “*Satwa*” section of the novel are “colonized” by different technological applications. Balaram’s bondage to carbolic acid is foregrounded, and Alu is linked to the weaver’s loom, whereas for the older boy, Rakhal, bombs and other makeshift weapons are an obsession. However, the most evident connection between technology, consumerism, and (neo-)colonialism is demonstrated in the later parts of the novel.

Here, consumerism is portrayed as being a more durable and sinister way of controlling nations than outright imperial aggression. Both Ghaziris and migrants are preoccupied with acquiring material possessions from foreign countries. Japanese products such as cassette recorders (p. 335), watches (p. 158), and video games (pp. 287 – 89), are particularly sought after, for their high technological capabilities. There is a poignant depiction of an elderly war-victim, whose tongue has been cut out, and whose one possession is a Japanese umbrella. This “Japanese Miracle” is the indirect cause of his death, as he falls in the sea after it and is eaten by sharks (p. 373). The desire for imported products destroys local businesses. Hajj Fahmy recognizes this when he argues that if the Star had opened the Souq’s shops would have soon

folded (p. 264). Western consumerism also erodes indigenous traditions, which is demonstrated when Rakesh tries to sell Ayurvedic laxatives, only to realize that:

The trouble really lay in the product. It was soon clear that people no longer wanted Ayurvedic laxatives. There was no market for black viscous liquids in old rum bottles; they wanted sparkling, bubbling salts which dissolved in water, or milky syrups in bottles with bright labels. They wanted advertisements and slogans which promised more than mere movement — promotions and success at work, marital triumphs, and refrigerators in their dowries. Regularity, balance and inner peace no longer sold (p. 182).

Here the bubble and sparkle in the marketing of Western medical products makes the distinctively Indian philosophy behind Ayurveda seem hopelessly old-fashioned.

Perhaps the most damning indictment of the nexus between capitalism, technology, and (neo-)colonialism is given in a portrayal of *Mariam*'s arrival at al-Ghazira. The lure that the Middle East exerts on the migrants onboard is embodied in their first glimpse of the lights strewn along the peninsular at night. The narrator comments on the implications of al-Ghazira's illuminations:

through a century and a half the same lights have shone in one part of the globe or another, wherever money and its attendant arms have chosen to descend on peoples unprepared for its onslaughts, and for all of those hundred and fifty years *Mariam*'s avatars have left that coast for those lights carrying with them an immense cargo of wanderers seeking their own destruction in giving flesh to the whims of capital (p. 189).

Although no explanation is forthcoming for the arbitrary choice of one hundred and fifty years as the timescale on which this “destruction” has taken place, it seems likely that this coincides with the period of overt British colonialism. Here money and technology are explicitly equated with the devastation of cultures unused to such motivations. Yet colonized peoples are also presented as being to some extent complicit in this devastation, because through their desire for material wealth they bring about their own downfall.

The Circle of Reason does not entirely reject capitalism; rather, the focus of its satire is the inhumanity of huge multinational corporations. Small businesses that are run in the Indian or Middle Eastern bazaar tradition tend not to be condemned by the novel. For example, Zindi is desperate to take over Forid Mian's small tailoring shop in the Souq, as she sees the Souq as “hope” (p. 291) and the shop as a “promise” (p. 220) of self-sufficiency and good times to come. Zindi is an ambitious, even ruthless

businesswoman, but she is presented sympathetically as a pragmatic yet compassionate survivalist. Nury the Damanhouris is another archetypal capitalist, as he manages to create a demand for eggs where there was none before. In “From an Egg-Seller’s Mind”, the story-teller, Hajj Fahmy, tells how the people of al-Ghazira used to eat eggs as and when their own hens supplied them, but that Nury persuaded people to buy from him when their hens failed to lay. He achieved this business success by building up contact with the community’s women, as they were responsible for household economy and taking care of the chickens. He was able to get close to the women because rumours of his impotence, which he probably started himself, meant that the men trusted him with their wives. The narrator concludes, “Nury built a trade on a story [...]. [He] was an artist. For him every egg was an epic, a thousand-page song of love, death and betrayal” (p. 247). This identification of Nury with oral story-telling and the imagination allows his brand of capitalism to escape narratorial condemnation, infused as it is with communal interaction and human emotions.

The novel’s censure is reserved for what has been described as the “desiring-machine”:³¹ the way in which the West holds “developing” countries in sway by fostering a dependency on technological advances. During his four days trapped under the Star’s rubble Alu has a Gandhian vision of an anti-materialist society. He makes a link between money and Pasteur’s notion of the “infinitely small” germ, arguing that both “travel[...] from man to man carrying contagion and filth, sucking people out and destroying them even in the safety of their own homes” (p. 281). As a result, he decides to start a campaign to banish money from their community. His laudable intentions, however, are distorted by his friends to such an extent that soon “[h]e could no longer understand what he’d started” (p. 315). In the Middle East, most migrants are “target workers”, whose aim in living there is to save a specific amount of money before returning home.³² Thus Alu’s followers interpret his anti-materialism as a cunning way of collectively saving money. His anti-materialist movement degenerates into unmitigated greed and commercialism, with pieces of paper replacing the function of money, and Alu’s friends becoming more obsessed by material possessions than they were previously. This is most evident in the highly ironic scene in which Alu’s followers — equipped with chits that stand for money and with dusters tied around their arms to ward off monetary contagion — go on a

shopping spree to buy calculators, televisions, American jeans, and Korean shirts (p. 341). Thus, it becomes evident that the applied side of science, technology, has far more appeal to the inhabitants of third-world countries than the more intangible alleged benefits of “pure” science that I have examined elsewhere.³³

Despite its publication nearly two decades ago and its acknowledged flaws, this novel still has a great deal of relevance in the light of recent history in the Persian Gulf region. When Ghosh was writing the novel in the mid-1980s, the Iran-Iraq war was in full swing, and this undoubtedly provided material for his dark depiction of the state murders of unarmed civilians at the end of the “*Rajas*” section and of the shadowy Oilmen surreptitiously manipulating al-Ghazira’s political order.³⁴ Yet, the subsequent two Gulf wars and the so-called “war on terror” are also foreshadowed in this prescient novel. The text’s themes of the international scramble for oil, the myth of terrorism, globalized capitalism as an alternative to outright colonial occupation, and illegal immigration are of course highly topical today. Through his multifarious layering of different literary forms, his transnational settings, and polyglot language, in this debut novel Ghosh adumbrates techniques for representing the “slipperiness” of the oil encounter in fiction that are refined in *In An Antique Land*.

¹ The novel’s three sections are named after Hindu concepts (*satwa*, *rajas*, and *tamas*), translated by Ghosh as “reason”, “passion”, and “death” respectively. Hindus believe that human personality is made up of different combinations of these three *gunas* or strands, which are interdependent and non-conscious (Julius Lipner, *Hindus: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, London: Routledge, 1994, p. 242). In another paper, I have discussed representations of reason in the first section of *The Circle of Reason*, “*Satwa*”: Claire Chambers, “Historicizing Scientific Reason in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Circle of Reason*”, in Tabish Khair, ed., *Amitav Ghosh: A Critical Companion*, Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003, pp. 36 – 55.

² See Michael Adas, *Machines as the Measure of Men: Science, Technology, and Ideologies of Western Dominance*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989.

³ Amitav Ghosh, “Petrofiction”, *New Republic*, 206 (2 March 1992), 29 – 34, 30.

⁴ *The Circle of Reason*, like many Indian novels written in the 1980s, owes a great stylistic debt to Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, London: Picador, 1981. The novel contains a wealth of symbolism, which seems to be a gesture towards Rushdie’s witty use of metaphor, but which is frustratingly empty and unsustained at times. *The Circle of Reason*’s depiction of minor characters also suffers by comparison with the lively and memorable characters that populate the pages of *Midnight’s Children*. The reader may easily become confused by the proliferation of sketchily-drawn characters such as Abu Fahl, Hajj Fahmy, and Forid Mian. Ghosh’s decision to abandon this literary ‘chutnification’ in subsequent novels signals the moment at which he begins to articulate his ideas more effectively. However, what is interesting about *The Circle of Reason* is not so much its rather derivative magic realist elements, but the more innovative use of such literary modes as the picaresque.

⁵ “Petrofiction”, p. 30.

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 29.

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ *ibid.*, p. 30.

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ Harry Sieber, *The Critical Idiom: The Picaresque*, London: Methuen, 1977, p. 1.

¹² *ibid.*, p. 9.

¹³ Amitav Ghosh, *The Circle of Reason*, London: Granta, 1994 [1986], pp. 363 – 67. Subsequent references are to this edition and will be cited in the text.

¹⁴ *The Critical Idiom: The Picaresque*, p. 26.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 10.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p. 59.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 65.

¹⁸ The novel's rewriting of the thriller or police novel genre is discussed in Yumna Siddiqi's astute and theoretically nuanced essay, "Police and Postcolonial Rationality in Amitav Ghosh's *The Circle of Reason*", *Cultural Critique*, 50 (2002), 175 – 211.

¹⁹ See, for example, Shyam S. Agarwalla, "Magic Realism in Amitav Ghosh's *The Circle of Reason*", in Amar Nath Prasad, ed., *Studies in Indian English Fiction*, Delhi: Sarap, 2001, pp. 149 – 58, and Damodar Rao, "Magic and Irony as Principles of Structure: A Reading of *The Circle of Reason*", in R.K. Dhawan, ed., *The Novels of Amitav Ghosh*, Delhi: Prestige, 1999, pp. 31 – 38.

²⁰ For a succinct definition of social realism, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_realist, and for a more detailed account of one nation's social realist literature, see David Foster, *Social Realism in the Argentine Narrative*, Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1986. Both of these sources suggest that social realism is closely connected to communist approaches to art and literature, and it is thus worth noting that *The Circle of Reason* increasingly discusses Marxist socialism, as is especially evident in the debate between Dr Verma and Dr Mishra in the novel's final part, "*Tamas*".

²¹ Allan M. Findlay, *The Arab World*, London: Routledge, 1994, p. 107.

²² *ibid.*, p. 115.

²³ T. Farah, F. al-Salem and M.K. al-Salem, "Arab Labour Migration: Arab Migrants in Kuwait", in Talal Asad and Roger Owen, eds., *Sociology of "Developing Societies": The Middle East*, London: Macmillan, 1983, pp. 42 – 64, p. 42.

²⁴ *The Arab World*, pp. 97 – 98.

²⁵ Y.A. Sayigh, "The Arab Oil Economy", in *Sociology of "Developing Societies"*, pp. 31 – 41.

²⁶ Peter N. Woodward, *Oil and Labor in the Middle East: Saudi Arabia and the Oil Boom*, New York: Praeger, 1988.

²⁷ "The Arab Oil Economy", pp. 36 – 37.

²⁸ This strand of plot draws on historical events. The Enlightenment scholars William Jones, Joseph Banks, and Robert Kyd were involved in the creation of a botanical garden for Calcutta (see Garland Cannon, *The Life and Mind of Oriental Jones: Sir William Jones, the Father of Modern Linguistics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, p. 332). Although such botanical gardens were depicted by the colonial administrators as being part of their humanitarian endeavour, and although plants such as sago and date palms were supposed to be transplanted to India to combat famine, the rhetoric masks the commercial designs behind their creation. The proposed famine-relief sago palms were ultimately never introduced to the botanical gardens, which were used instead for the cultivation of commercially important plants, such as tea, cinchona, and spices (see Zaheer Baber, *The Science of Empire: Scientific Knowledge, Civilization, and Colonial Rule in India*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998, pp. 168 – 70).

²⁹ Here, I am of course referring to Daniel Headrick, *The Tools of Empire: Technology and European Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century*, New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981.

³⁰ In *In an Antique Land*, Ghosh uses the phrase "the husbandry of the Western academy" to describe the Western academy's garnering of the Cairo Geniza documents. It is a curiously ambivalent expression, as the word "husbandry" has several meanings: "farming; (good, bad) economy; careful management" (*OED*). Farming is about cultivation and nurture as well as the exploitation of resources for profit. As the parenthetical words "good" and "bad" indicate, the second, economic sense of "husbandry" is also ambivalent. It could be interpreted approvingly as thriftiness, or condemned as draconian financial organization. The final nuance, "careful management", is equally irresolute, indicating both attentive supervision and unequal power structures. Thus, Ghosh's phrase alerts us to both the positive and negative aspects of the Western academy's actions in Egypt. Ultimately, however, the use of the word "husbandry" in both contexts evokes the West's violent intercession in other nations' histories. Two further connotations of the word "husbandry" not included in the dictionary are the notion of animal husbandry — a euphemistic term for the breeding of animals, often for slaughter — and the word's inevitable association with a dominant, male spouse. Underlying Ghosh's use of this word, therefore, is the suggestion of killing and domination.

³¹ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, preface by Michel Foucault, trans. by Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane, London: Athlone, 1984 [1977].

³² Ismail Serageldin, James A. Socknat, Stace Birks, Bob Li, and Clive A. Sinclair, *Manpower and International Labor Migration in the Middle East and North Africa*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1983, p. 55.

³³ "Historicizing Scientific Reason".

³⁴ Derek Gregory provides a compelling account of America's duplicitous dealings behind the scenes of the Iran-Iraq war (1980 – 88). America's actions included winking at Iraq's procurement of chemical weapons to use against the Kurds and supporting Saddam Hussein in his fight against the anti-American Iranian regime, while still covertly supplying the latter with anti-aircraft and anti-tank missiles. Derek Gregory, *The Colonial Present: Afghanistan, Palestine, Iraq*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2004, pp. 153 – 56.